

Memory and Water:

*A Vietnamese Australian
family's sense of loss and home*

Boi Huyen Ngo

PhD 2018

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Boi Huyen Ngo, declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Technology Sydney. This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution. This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

Signature:

Production Note:

Signature removed prior to publication.

Date: 17/12/2018

acknowledgements

I am grateful.

Firstly, to all my supervisors. I am proud that this thesis was supervised by three strong and ethically-driven women.

Heather Goodall has guided me into becoming more of an ethical, thoughtful and conscientious researcher and writer. I am thankful for her commitment and dedication while supervising me. She is always supportive, patient and incredibly kind. I emerged from every meeting filled with inspiration. She helped me strive to be the best I could be. Through her encouragement, particularly in acute moments of self-doubt, I am able to finish this project.

Katrina Schlunke supervised me at the beginning of this PhD. She gave me feedback for almost four years – from the final year of my bachelor's degree, while supervising my honours, and across oceans when I was living in Germany. Throughout, she has helped me to embrace my stories, my memories and my culture. I would not have taken this path in the first place if it weren't for her enthusiasm.

Elaine Kelly has given me incredible supervision for six months. She has been generous with her time and energy. Our weekly meetings over tea were filled with much learning, joy and support.

Next, to Jackey Coyle of Wordy-Gurdy who edited this thesis. Not only did she edit thoroughly and with care, but she approached the project with much enthusiasm and the love of the written word. It was a joy to work with her.

And to my family – Mum and her partner; Dad and my stepmum; my sister and my stepbrother. My parents have inspired all the beautiful and hopeful memories and stories. Thank you for the trust in me.

My wider family is spread all over Australia, Vietnam and the USA. This thesis was written with immense love and respect for all of them. Family in Vietnam housed me during my stay there and I am so happy to have the opportunity to know them all better during this magical time. I am a proud descendent of both sides of my family as well as my stepfamily. Thank you to the German family in-laws, who welcomed and encouraged me.

Many professionals and academics have given me feedback, consultations and advice. Andrew Dawson, the Director of National Poisons Register and Clinical Toxicology of the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney generously gave time in his busy schedule to help me to explain the ambivalent nature of dioxin contamination. The academics of Potsdam University, Germany organised the Experimental Histories workshops; in particular, Anke Bartels, Anja Schwarz and Lars Eckstein gave ideas and were delightful company. CA Cranston and Barbara Halloway gave me feedback for a journal article I published about Agent Orange. Catherine Robinson organised and facilitated the Writing Intensives discussion group for postgraduates of Transforming Cultures, UTS. Devleena Ghosh was my alternate supervisor, a great conversationalist and gave me feedback.

My colleagues – my fellow academic writers – have supported me and given me a space for nourishing, communal writing and the sharing of experience. Tara McLennan, Alyssa Critchley and Kate Sands, you have given me so much advice and help, both intellectually and emotionally. Lots more coffee to be shared among us and years of friendship and writing companionships to come.

Thanks to the bar, restaurant and floor team of the Frannz restaurant and club, Berlin where I wrote most of the thesis in 2015. In particular the head chef, Richard Mohr, has literally given me food for thought throughout the year. And thanks to the general

manager, Theresa Räthel, a strong-willed woman, filled with positivity. And the bar team for all those cocktails, hot chocolates with whipped cream on top and their lively conversations during cigarette breaks. It is vibrant spaces like that which make writing the PhD less isolating.

My long-term best friend Vanessa Setiadi happens to work at the Graduate Research School, UTS. And thanks to all the helpful team of the Graduate Research School for their patience.

And to all my friends I have shared cheese and wine with.

My non-human companions, the canaries and budgerigar Diep Diep, Fritz and Olly not only created the songs, chirps and babbles that provided background music for the thesis writing, but gave me amusing companionship.

And finally, yet most importantly, I am grateful to the man who was there from the beginning – my husband, Christian Flügel. You are my anchor throughout this whole endeavour. I am lucky you are in my life.

This thesis was written with the love of three incredible cities of the world: Huế, Vietnam; Sydney, Australia; and Berlin, Germany. Three cities I am blessed to have called home in many stages of my life.

Water is truly the transitory element. It is the essential, ontological metamorphosis between fire and earth. A being dedicated to water is a being in flux. He dies every minute; something of his substance is constantly falling away. Daily death is not fire's exuberant form of death, piecing heaven with its arrows; daily death is the death of water. Water always flows, always falls, always ends in horizontal death. In innumerable examples, we shall see that for the materialising imagination, death associated with water is more dream-like than death associated with earth: the pain of water is infinite. Gaston Bachelard ¹

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R Farrell (Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation – Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1983), 6.

Much of Chapter 1, Section 2 titled ‘The Haunting of Agent Orange within the Waters of Rivers and Bodies’ was published under the title ‘The Haunting of Agent Orange within the Waters of Rivers and Bodies of Vietnamese Australians’ in *AJE: Australasian Journal of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* 16 (2016)

contents

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Figures list.....	x
Abstract.....	xiii
Introduction: Water, Memory and Homeliness in Vietnam and Australia.....	16
 Part 1: Homelands.....	 50
Chapter 1. Mapping Emotional Homelands.....	52
- Section 1. The shores of escape.....	54
- Section 2. The haunting of Agent Orange within the waters of rivers and bodies.....	67
- Section 3. Fishing for home.....	87
Chapter 2. Water Buffalos: Swimming Species and Human Migration.....	101
- Section 1. The diminishing Vietnamese water buffalo.....	102
- Section 2. The emerging Australian water buffalo.....	118
 Part 2: Sea Journeys.....	 161
Chapter 3. Ocean Deaths: Reflections on Funerary Practices and the Haunting of Unsolved Grief.....	163
- Section 1. The importance of ceremony.....	165
- Section 2. Distribution of death and withholding access to ceremony.....	182
Chapter 4. Boats and Cargo Ships: Vessels of Fear.....	204
- Section 1. Boats as reminder of colonial illegitimacy.....	206
- Section 2. Boat turn-backs.....	219

- Section 3. Maritime Memories.....	245
Part 3. Shore Arrivals.....	259
Chapter 5. Shore Encounters: Music, Clothes, Clogs.....	260
- Section 1. Liminal possibilities.....	261
- Section 2. Clothes and clogs.....	272
- Section 3. Ethics of encounter.....	288
Conclusion: The House of Seashells.....	306
Bibliography.....	318

figures list

- page 19 Figure 1. Clement Paligaru, ‘Vietnamese Community Farewells Malcolm Fraser’
- page 32 Figure 2. Screenshot from SBS The Feed, ‘Torture Therapy’
- page 48 Figure 3. Me by the waterfall in a National Park near Huế city, Vietnam, 2013
- page 55 Figure 4. Children playing soccer in the rural districts
- page 62 Figure 5. An Lai landscape with a grave, farmer and water buffalo
- page 62 Figure 6. The fisherman on the shores of Quảng Công commune
- page 73 Figure 7. Orphaned black bear cub ‘Little Smokey,’ Smokey Bear website
- page 74 Figure 8. A 1965 poster of the Smokey Bear
- page 74 Figure 9. A modified poster of Smokey Bear for the Operation Ranch Hand
- page 77 Figure 10. A ‘No fishing’ sign alongside Parramatta River at Breakfast Point
- page 83 Figure 11. Website Our Living River: Parramatta River
- page 84 Figure 12. ABC News, ‘Kimberly Spraying’
- page 102 Figure 13. Dan Tin Tuong’s silk painting
- page 107 Figure 14. Thanh Chuong, Childhood Memory
- page 108 Figure 15. Thanh Chuong, A Child with Buffalo
- page 111 Figure 16. Quoc LB Tran, ‘Childhood on Water Buffalo’
- page 113 Figure 17. Dan Piraro, Bizarro Sunday cartoon, 1999
- page 116 Figure 18. Carl Curtain, ‘A shipment of 195 buffalo were sent from Darwin Port’
- page 121 Figure 19. Matt Brann, ‘Inspecting buffalo at the Animex feedlot in Hai Phong’
- page 123 Figure 20. Shaun Tan, ‘The water buffalo’
- page 125 Figure 23. Book cover of *Shallow in the Deep End*
- page 129 Figure 22. John Mawurndjulam, Rainbow Serpent (with Buffalo horns
- page 130 Figure 23. Jimmy Njiminjuma, Rainbow Serpent with Buffalo head and horns
- page 131 Figure 24. Jimmy Njiminjuma. Rainbow Serpent with Buffalo Head
- page 133 Figure 25. A buffalo painted in X-ray style
- page 135 Figure 26. Costumes designed by John King
- page 136 Figure 27. Unidentified hunter with water buffalo
- page 137 Figure 28. Farmers in An Ly Commune, Thừa Thiên-Huế Province
- page 139 Figure 29. Queenslander Pictorial, supplement to *The Queenslander*, 11/10/1919
- page 141 Figure 30. Four Aboriginal men skinning a water buffalo, Northern Territory
- page 142 Figure 31. Ron Edwards, Sketching for ‘The Buffalo Shooter Song’, 1976
- page 143 Figure 32. Buffalo horns, Charles Micet Collection
- page 146 Figure 33. Aboriginal Australian men preparing a water buffalo carcass for cooking
- page 149 Figure 34. James Oaten, ‘Feral water buffalo in Arhmen Land,’ ABC News
- page 149 Figure 35. James Oaten, ‘Djelk rangers cut up a shot water buffalo,’ ABC News
- page 156 Figure 36. Chinese wood carrier, 1915, photographer unknown

page 156	Figure 37. John Buscall, Buffalo, 1931
page 160	Figure 38. Screenshot of scene from Crocodile Dundee, Peter Faiman (dir.) 1986
page 166	Figure 39. Ong Ngoai in the South Vietnamese Army
page 171	Figure 40. Photograph of Ong Ngoai's front yard of the home in An Ly
page 173	Figure 41. One of many numerous hòn non bộ made by Ong Ngoai
page 176	Figure 42. Ong Ngoai picking grapes from the vineyards of the Barossa Valley
page 193	Figure 43. Kate Durham, A painting in the series titled SIEV X
page 199	Figure 44. Warren Langley's artwork '...the ocean bed their tomb'
page 201	Figure 45. Aerial photo of SIEV X Memorial, Weston Park, Yarralumla
page 206	Figure 46. Euan MacLeod, Speak no evil, see no evil, hear no evil
page 209	Figure 47. Avant Postcard, 'Boat People' featuring photograph of Jessica Dobbs
page 212	Figure 48. Anthony Hamilton's sculpture titled Myth and Mirage
page 214	Figure 49. Thomas J. Maslen, Sketching the coasts of Australia, 1831
page 216	Figure 50. Rev. John Flynn, Camels carrying a boat, around 1920s
page 229	Figure 51. Caroline Chisholm, 'To the Colonist of New South Wales', 1846
page 229	Figure 52. 'Migrant Flood?: Italians for Australia', Newcastle Sun, 1926
page 229	Figure 53. 'Alien Flood', Nambucca and Bellingen News, April 13, 1928
page 230	Figure 54. Walter E Bethel, 'Convicts Saved Us From Flood of Asiatic Migrants'
page 232	Figure 55. Frank Cranston, 'Are the 'boat people' a trickle preceding the flood?'
page 233	Figure 56. John Elliot, 'Drifting in a boat with nowhere to go', Canberra Times
page 234	Figure 57. Hugh Lamberton, 'Refugee flood a danger: Hewson', Canberra Times
page 235	Figure 58. Rudd's Record, Liberal Party election campaign advertisement, 2013
page 239	Figure 59. Department of Immigration and Border Protection, No way campaign
page 238	Figure 60. Australian government advertisement in Quetta, Pakistan
page 239	Figure 61. Photograph by Michael Bachelard, A used Australian lifeboat
page 241	Figure 62. Richard Hind, Two wooden Vietnamese fishing boats, ABC News
page 241	Figure 63. Michael Jensen, Two Boats from Vietnam, Darwin, November 1977
page 246	Figure 64. The fishing farms around the shores and sandy hills of An Ly
page 247	Figure 65. The Malaysian cargo ship, split in half, on the shores near An Ly, 2013
page 250	Figure 66. APA, 'Asylum seekers on the deck of the Tampa in 2001,' ABC News
page 255	Figure 67. Tờ do at the Australian National Maritime Museum
page 256	Figure 68. A screenshot from the film Mother Fish, 2009, directed by Khoa Do
page 261	Figure 69. 'borderxing guide' xing
page 263	Figure 70. Heath Bunting, 'Perimeter Footpath, Part of BorderXing,' Tate
page 264	Figure 71. Damiel and Cassiel in Wim Wender (dir.), Wings of Desire, 1987
page 264	Figure 72. A Berliner in Wim Wender (dir.), Wings of Desire. 1987
page 268	Figure 73. Charles Meere, Australian Beach Pattern, 1940
page 270	Figure 74. Vernon Ah Kee, Wegrewhere #3

page 274 Figure 75. Photograph of a section of the Hải Vân Pass, Vietnam
page 274 Figure 76. The mountains before entering the Hải Vân Pass
page 276 Figure 77. Jack Cahill, 'Vung Tau, Vietnam April, 1975' Toronto Star
page 279 Figure 78. Photograph of my mother's music notebook
page 280 Figure 79. Photograph of my mother's music notebook
page 284 Figure 80. Khoa Do (dir), Mother Fish, 2010, Titan View Distributor
page 292 Figure 81. A photograph of Chinese musicians
page 296 Figure 82. Andrew Bolt, 'The word is out: no boat can reach Australia'
page 304 Figure 83. Morton Fauerby, Wadjularbinna
page 317 Figure 84. The beach and I, 2013

abstract

To fully comprehend the issue of migration is to go beyond understanding migration as movement from one place to the other, such as crossing international borders. It is to look into whole life histories which includes the mundane everyday life of a migrant. This thesis addresses the need to understand the everyday experience with memory for heightened awareness and empathy within society towards refugees.

Inspired by the methodology of auto-ethnography and the writing of family history, this non-traditional thesis will explore the intergenerational memories of my Vietnamese Australian refugee family through the poetic device of water to explore the research question: How does exploring the presence of water within Vietnamese Australian memories of loss and homeliness create new approaches for understanding migration in Australia? As the fluid composition of water defies objectivity, migration is fluid, intangible and seeps into the subjective way of being in the world. This thesis uses migrant memories of water as a tool for encapsulating the migrant experiences of a family.

Complex ideas and experiences of loss and homeliness within Australia and Vietnam would demonstrate how nuanced the migrant experiences are. The thesis contests the idea of home as a comfortable site of belonging. Rather, home is a site of becoming, constantly changing and oscillating between belonging and un-belonging. For many Vietnamese Australian refugees, water was not only the means to escape one's homeland to another form of homeland - by boat - but is a part of sensory experiences of feeling both at home and displaced within Australian landscapes. The Vietnamese word of water, nước, is the exact same word for country, evoking a linguistic and cultural link to this natural matter to the collective emotional and cultural sense of belonging.

The thesis explores various themes, activities, and landscapes surrounding ideas of water. This includes rivers, fishing, ocean deaths, water buffalo, boats and beaches. Each of these themes opens up new ways of thinking about the nature of forced migration within the field of Environmental Humanities and Cultural Studies. The contested nature of home becomes layered and complex when political meanings around what it means to be a migrant living in a country that was invaded and dispossessed from the Aboriginal people are explored. It challenges ideas that legitimise colonialism through violent ways of asserting power, governance and border controls in Australia. This thesis explores intergenerational experiences of migration through memories, both lived and transmitted through stories.